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**Rural life**

It's all there in popular fiction. From Jane Austen in the 1810s, via Charles Dickens' pictures of mid century London life, to HG Wells' *Time Machine* in 1895, the world of literature moved from comedies of country manners to blistering portraits of urban poverty and, finally, time travel. Not bad for 80-odd years.

Although the Industrial Revolution had already begun, Britain in 1800 had changed little in centuries. It was a rural country, dominated by agriculture. For most, the world was restricted to their village - where their family had probably lived for generations - and the nearest market town, not surprising when the fastest thing on earth was a galloping horse, covering 100 miles a day at best. If you lived in Somerset, London was almost foreign, much as it had been in 1600. You wouldn't even have been using the same time - with the sun rising around ten minutes later than in London, Bristol clocks ran ten minutes behind.

Horizons were limited and life was slow. It was horsepower or nothing, and daylight and the seasons ruled the countryside. But all that was about to change. Although the steam engine was first invented in 1769 by James Watt, for decades his monopoly had prevented significant development and kept prices high. It was only in the nineteenth century that the real impact of steam would be fully felt.

And what an impact. Steam changed everything. It was faster, more powerful, and could work independently of natural power sources, such as water. Traction engines saw fields ploughed twenty times faster than before, and factories could be anywhere. They chose towns and cities. At a time of massive population expansion in Britain (from 9 million in 1801 to 36 million in 1911), cities were expanding even faster. Once islands in a sea of fields, needing the agricultural economy to sustain them, they forged ahead as farmworkers made redundant by steam migrated to the nearest town to find work. Manchester and Sheffield quadrupled between 1801 and 1851, Bradford and Glasgow grew eightfold. Cities were the masters now.

**Railway mania**

Although migration itself was not new, it had been difficult and correspondingly rare. The birth of the steam locomotive and the railway networks made it easier and more commonplace. In 1825 the Stockton and Darlington Railway opened, followed by the Liverpool and Manchester Railway five years later. The age of the railway had begun, reducing transport times, lowering transport costs, consuming raw materials and stimulating investment. The 1840s saw 'railway mania': by 1851 6,800 miles of track had been laid. Soon it was possible to travel from London to Bristol in hours rather than days at speeds of around 60 mph.

But what did this actually mean? Reduced travel times inevitably shrank the country and widened horizons from local to national. The old days of local time (as in Bristol) jarred with railways that crossed the country and ran to a national timetable, and in 1845 the rail companies successfully lobbied Parliament to abolish it. The edges of Britain were joining up with the centres - the cities.

The spread of railways stimulated communication, and Rowland Hill's standardisation of postal charges in 1839 saw a boom in mail services. But this was nothing compared to the revolution of the telegraph. If you think the internet is big (and given you're reading this online the chances are you do) then just imagine how much bigger it would seem if you had never before seen a computer or telephone. That's what the telegraph was to the Victorians. If rail travel shrank the country, the telegraph crushed it. It opened in the 1840s and soon went stratospheric - within ten years exchanging telegrams had become part of everyday life. By the mid 1860s London was connected with New York and ten years later messages could be exchanged between London and Bombay in minutes.

This had vast implications for business and communication. The telegraph marked the start of truly global markets and news. It marked an irreversible acceleration in the pace of commercial and everyday life. New mass communication via the telegraph, newspapers and - from 1876 - the telephone meant that the rate of change accelerated further. New inventions, like the X-ray in 1895, could be flashed around the globe in days. The age of media frenzy had arrived.

**Time is money**

The Victorians had become addicted to speed and, like all speed crazy kids, they wanted to go ever faster. Time was money and efficiency became increasingly important. Although division of labour had been conceived by Adam Smith and illustrated by a pin factory in The Wealth of Nations in 1776, it could now become fully realised. This specialisation and - by implication - individualisation of labour was in marked contrast to the rural means of production, in which the family was the means of production, consumption and socialisation.

With greater speed came a greater need for industries and businesses to make more and make it quicker. Steam made this possible and changed working life forever. Gone were the days when work was dictated by natural forces: steam engines were servant to neither season nor sunshine. Factories had foremen and life became correspondingly more regimented. The clocking-on machine was invented in 1885 and time and motion studies to increase efficiency would be introduced only some twenty years later. But it was not all bad news. Agricultural incomes depended on variable harvests and weather. Factories provided secure and predictable income, but long hours.

Working life was becoming increasingly regulated, and the working week was reorganised to promote ever-greater efficiency. The old custom of St. Monday - when no work was done - was gradually phased out and to compensate, work stopped around midday on Saturday and did not resume until Monday morning. A new division between 'work' and 'leisure' emerged, and this new block of weekend leisure time coincided with the development of spectator sports like cricket and football, and the rise of music hall entertainment for the new working classes.

New loyalties were needed to fill some of the vacuum caused by the demise of close-knit rural communities, and they didn't come from the church. Many of the middle class (itself a new term dating only from 1812) became concerned about the godlessness of the working classes when it emerged that only 50 per cent of the eligible population attended a church service on Census Sunday in 1851.

But if the Anglican Church was seen to be losing the working classes, Methodism was increasingly popular. It fitted the ethos of the age. Commerce and business brought a new spirit of self-help, popularised in the 1859 book of the same name by Samuel Smiles, with the opening line, 'Heaven helps those who help themselves'. Methodism stressed hard work and self-discipline, and this sentiment was reflected in the rise of evening classes for the working classes.

The modern world was opening up new opportunities for those who would work hard enough to take them. A new breed of self-made man - never a woman - had emerged. Proud of his accomplishments, these nineteenth century yuppies encapsulated the spirit of this cut-throat capitalism, sitting at their desks, twanging their braces and figuring out how to make more moolah.

This spirit of competition extended even as far as science. *Charles Darwin's Origin of Species* (1859) described the theory of natural selection, or the survival of the fittest: the ultimate rat race. The nineteenth century was a world of free markets, free trade and laissez-faire government, with all moves towards paternalism - in areas such as public health and poor laws - fiercely resisted. It was every man for himself.

**Rural decline**

Meanwhile, the countryside was attracting ever less interest. The Corn Laws spelled out the shifting balance of power. Passed in 1815 to fix the price of corn and protect the interests of the agriculturists that then dominated Parliament, they were repealed only 31 years later, against bitter protest from landowners and loud applause from industrialists. Farmers were passé: everything that was anything was urban. Punch magazine's comic stereotypes caricaturing agricultural labourers as backward yokels in smocks and chewing straws flourished in the 1870s and live on to this day.

So what happened to our child of 1800? Raised in a slow, rural life, he probably migrated to the city, leaving behind his old cosy community to start afresh on his own. Working in a factory, he would have been on his own: if lucky and diligent, he might have made a comfortable living. But every decade would have seen ground breakingly new inventions and the pace of life pick up: he might have travelled on trains and exchanged telegrams before he died. What is certain is that the world must have seemed ever smaller, while spinning ever faster

**Describe the changes that occurred during this age as people moved from an agricultural society to an industrial society. What inventions and technologies influenced them the most and why?**